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ABSTRACT

The booklet provides resources for blind and visually handicapped individuals interested in birding as a hobby. It describes a midwestern group of visually impaired birders and discusses the importance and variety of bird sounds. Listed are a selection of recorded and braille books available on birding, sources of commercial recordings of bird songs, and clubs of persons interested in birding. Since far more birds are heard than seen, the hobby is seen as especially appropriate for the visually impaired. The directory section lists both adult and children's materials on either discs, cassettes, or braille. An order form is also included. (DB)

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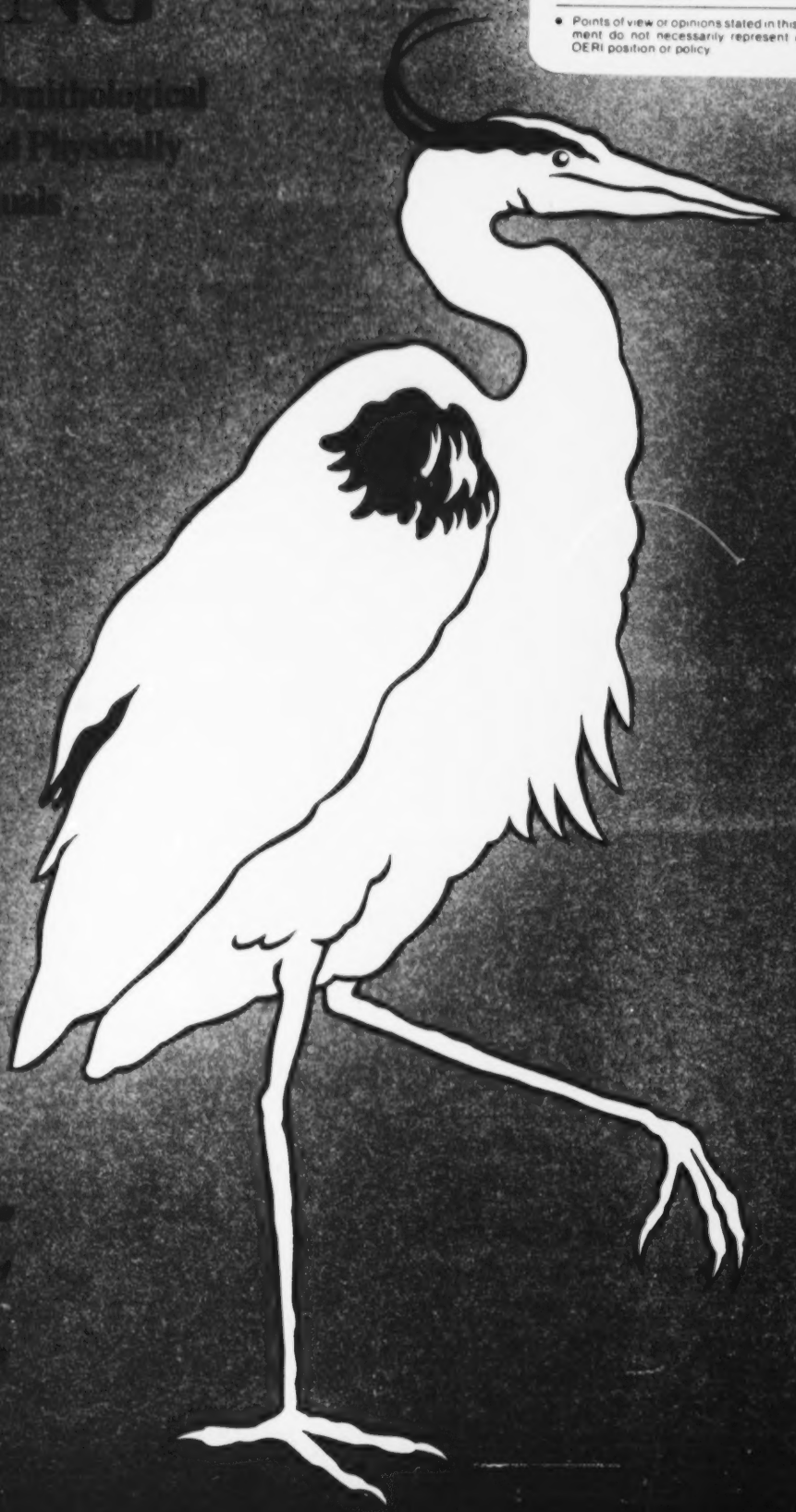

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Introduction

Birds are ever present in our environment. They surround us and cause wonder. Bright and dull flashes combine with soft and sharp calls and songs.

Only a small number of people take the time to study our feathered associates. Of course, the caw of the crow and the honk of the goose are noticed, but for the most part birds are ignored by all but a few inquisitive bird-watchers, or birders as they are often called.

Blind individuals often perceive birding as an experience limited to those with sight. However, it is important to know that sight and sound are both independently important in pursuing a knowledge of bird life. Indeed, the identification of a specific bird is often made by sound alone.

This booklet has been created to acquaint you with ways birding can be done by blind and visually handicapped individuals. You will be introduced to a midwestern group of visually impaired birders; the importance and variety of bird sounds; a selection of recorded and braille books available through your regional or subregional library; sources of commercial recordings of bird songs; and a club where you can associate with individuals holding a mutual interest in birding.

There are 680 individual species of birds on this continent. May you have luck in finding, identifying, and knowing the habits of a good number. Exploring the rudiments of breeding, migration, range, voice, food, habitat, and behavior of a few species local to your residence, will bring a lifetime of enjoyment: a lifetime when every step out of your living space will bring you into contact with the exciting world of our avian population.

Frank Kurt Cylke
Editor

Washington, D.C.
August 1987

Following Songs of Invisible Birds

by Hattie Clark

On the morning of the hike, eleven students from Foreman High climb cautiously out of their school bus and huddle in a group at North Park Village, a 155-acre green belt on Chicago's northwest side. They can hear the hum of distant traffic and nearby bees. They can smell a strange potpourri of pollution and honeysuckle. And they can feel the breeze that makes leaves sing. But they can't see the shadows shimmying on the ground. Or the cloudless sky. Or far-off trees that pattern into lime lollipops. Or the birds rustling through the spring foliage.

Nevertheless, for three hours the students pick their way through woods, meadows, and marshland, identifying about thirty bird species--all by sound, not sight.

The students, who are visually impaired, are learning to be "birders."

The outing is part of a program put together by Steve Waller, an education associate with the

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Chicago Academy of Sciences and director of the Canadian Wilderness Voyage Program, Ely, Minn. "Every morning up in Minnesota, I'd bird for an hour. I kept track of all the bird species that I heard and all the bird species that I actually saw. The ratio turned out to be seven to one in favor of sound over sight," Mr. Waller says.

So to him, the activity is a natural for kids who can't see.

Right off, Waller splits the group into twos, a sighted volunteer with each visually impaired student. "I'm gonna turn you loose now," he says. "What you guys have to do is come up with some way for remembering those birdsongs."

And so they did:

"You'd better clean up your room, or else! . . . I love, I love, I love to eat. . . . Help. . . . Who cooks for you?, . . . Cream of Wheat. . . . Potato chip. . . . Please, please, please, Canada, Canada, Canada."

These silly sayings, called mnemonics, help the kids identify a particular bird's song. (The phrases and the corresponding birds are listed at the end of this article.)

The volunteers are equipped with pencil and paper for recording the mnemonics as students translate the chips and chirps into words. It's Waller's job to keep tabs on the whole singing show, so he can later supply the appropriate bird names.

"Hey," says someone, "sounds like kids kissin' overhead." It's an observation that prompts a snicker or two, but there're no smoochers in the trees. It's a chimney swift that's here for the summer.

"Shhhhh. Sounds like a squeaky swing set," says another. Actually, it's one of the blue jay's calls. But from then on, the kids refer to the jay as "that squeaky swing-set bird."

For now, that's OK with Waller. He doesn't care if students make up their own names and mnemonics. Whatever is meaningful to them is fine with him. His first concern is that the young people "remember" the birdsongs--and associate them with types of terrain.

Just pulling a song out of the trees and pinning a bird's name on it isn't enough, though. Waller constantly prods students to match birds with habitats.

"You hear about the Indians having this mystic power of knowing what's over the hill. Well, you can do that, too," he tells them as they crunch along a trail covered with wood chips.

Listen for the birds, and they'll clue you in on the surroundings--both close and over the hill, he explains. Most of the kids are now adept at linking pigeons with city streets; song sparrows with open fields; robins with parks; downy woodpeckers and cardinals with suburbia; and gulls with Lake Michigan.

That's a sailing start for young people who spend much of their spare time indoors, listening to TV and radio.

Waller is a demanding teacher, not content to let a blind student slip into defeat

with, "I don't know what it is. And I don't know where it is." Almost always he counters with, "We'll find it." And he leads a string of pairs onto less-traveled paths where undergrowth tickles legs and branches swat faces. But nobody seems to care. They're in search of the catbird that's making a "mew."

Waller's rapport with these kids didn't just pop out with the sunshine on that spring day. He and Cathy Hein, the academy's coordinator for special programs, worked hard with the students over a stretch of time, building up to the final outing at the height of the migratory season.

At the outset, the naturalist--in a subtle sort of way--let the non-seeing kids know they're well equipped for this activity because they're auditorily oriented. After all, once foliage is out in full, even the best of the sighted birders can't see through all the greenery, so they, too, resort to bird "listening" instead of "watching" much of the time. Birding is definitely a game in which the visually impaired can compete--and sometimes with an edge.

A key lesson is to memorize the sounds of fifteen basic birds such as the robin, sparrow, starling, and the like. This cuts down on confusion when students finally go into the field, because they can simply shut out these more common sounds to concentrate on locating unusual ones--like the olive-sided flycatcher, which calls, "Quick, three beers."

Waller and Hein also let students measure and touch mounted bird specimens, because some lacked a solid concept of these creatures.

"If you've always been blind, you might easily think birds are the size of insects--or the size of a horse, for that matter," says Laurel Watson, coordinator of programs for the visually impaired in Chicago Public Schools.

"This particular nature program looks in depth at characteristics that are really meaningful to a blind person--size, texture, sound," she explains. Ms. Watson helped Waller and Hein ascertain students' special needs for the bird listening course, which was also presented to six visually impaired students at Bowen High. According to Watson, the program's big plus is that it teaches these handicapped young people about a variety of environments.

As the kids sit in knee-high grass at North Park Village, the warning cries of red-wing blackbirds pepper the air.

"Hear that?" Waller asks. "What do you know is nearby?"

"Marshland," comes the student chorus.

"All right!" says Waller, obviously pleased. And he drags out his king-size rubber boots, ready to talk the kids into their next adventure. One by one, he wants them to don the boots and wade with him into the marsh to learn what it's really like. Their banter and laughter stop. The marsh is an unknown, more scary than unlit streets to those who see.

Following Songs of Invisible Birds

Then, tentatively, Joe Abernathy puts aside his cane and reaches out for the boots. This senior, who has been blind since birth, is clearly a hero among his peers. Squish, squish, and slop, into the marsh he goes. He touches the water and the cattails, and now he truly knows where the red-winged blackbird lives.

Others follow in his footsteps to discover that unknowns aren't always awful. But a few hide faces in hands or pull sweat shirts over heads. To them, the marsh is one step too far--for now.

Here are the answers to the bird calls mentioned in the above story:

"You'd better clean up your room, or else:" yellow warbler.

"I love, I love, I love to eat:" Nashville warbler.

"Help!:" warning cry of red-winged blackbird.

"Who cooks for you?" barred owl.

"Cream of Wheat:" tufted titmouse.

"Potato chip:" goldfinch.

"Please, please, please, Canada, Canada, Canada:" white-throated sparrow.

Books about Birds

Adult Nonfiction

Discs

The Peacocks of Baboquivari RD 20283
by Erma J. Fisk
With considerable spirit and a sharp eye, the forthright septuagenarian author-widow, an accomplished amateur naturalist, chronicles five months of bird netting, banding, measuring, and counting in a stark, lovely Arizona mountain valley. She also discourses on varieties of birds from the fascinating hummingbird to the raucous starling.

The Adventure of Birds RD 10240
by Charlton Ogburn
An award-winning nature writer discusses the beauty of birds: their flight and migration, their calls, and the feeding and training of their young.

Adventures in Birding: Confessions of a Listener RD 8468
by Jean Piatt
Detailed log of a bird-watching trip from Alaska to Mexico. More than six hundred species were sighted, including the Colima Warbler, the Blackchinned Sparrow, and the Great Gray Owl.

That Quail, Robert RD 7247
by Margaret A. Stanger
The true account of a female quail, mistakenly called Robert, who hatched from an abandoned egg and developed under the care of a retired couple on Cape Cod. Robert shared family life uncaged and rejected offers of freedom.

Cassettes

Stories about Birds and Bird Watchers from Bird Watcher's Digest RC 18955
edited by Mary Beacom Bowers
foreword by Roger Tory Peterson
Collection of thirty-eight tales chronicles the adventures and foibles of countless bird watchers. Subjects include rescuing and caring for a baby starling, an American bittern who liked fox-trots, and the world's largest living bird, the wandering albatross.

State Birds and Flowers RC 14674
by Olive Lydia Earle
An artist and naturalist describes the official bird and flower of each state; she explains the nesting habits and food of the birds and the growth and reproductive process of the flowers.

Parrots' Wood RC 23381
by Erma J. Fisk
The author, an octogenarian, spent a month on a remote plantation in Belize known as Parrots' Wood, where she studied wintering migrant songbirds and their adjustment to a diminishing habitat. She set mist nets, banded birds, baked bread, sipped rum, and kept a journal of daily events with reminiscences of family and friends.

Iceland Summer: Adventures of a Bird Painter RC 16528
by George Miksch Sutton
The day-to-day experiences of three enthusiastic ornithologists who drove and hiked over a large part of Iceland, with boat trips to some of the smaller islands nearby. The author, well known for his faithful bird paintings, has a keen eye for the variations in plumage of such unfamiliar species as the ptarmigan, puffin, shearwater, and skau, and he describes vividly what he saw.

Braille

Window into a Nest BR 3981
by Geraldine Lux Flanagan
An intimate look at the private world of a family of birds. Follows a cock and hen through courtship and bonding, mating and laying the eggs, and parenting a brood of seven until the chicks are ready to fly from the nest.

Sandy: The True Story of a Rare Sandhill Crane Who Joined Our Family BR 807
by Dayton O. Hyde
The author tells of plunging into an icy stream to rescue two eggs from the nest of a sandhill crane. When one of them hatches in an incubator, he has quite an impact on the author's family. This is also a serious account of the problem of survival facing the sandhill crane.

The Falconer of Central Park BR 6009
by Donald Knowler
Captivated by New York's Central Park, a British journalist records his daily visits. It is a story of birds and other wildlife, and of several varieties of the human species. He also writes of the hard-core birding fraternity, vagrants, drug dealers, and tourists.

The Island BR 1774
by Ronald Mathias
The author recounts his life on Skokholm, a small island off the coast of Wales where he studied the wildlife, especially the sea birds, from the 1920s until World War II.

That Quail, Robert BR 355
by Margaret A. Stanger
The true account of a female quail, mistakenly called Robert, who hatched from an abandoned egg and developed under the care of a retired couple on Cape Cod. Robert shared family life uncaged and rejected offers of freedom.

Adult Fiction

Cassettes

Squeak RC 21118
by John Bowen
This short, witty novel stars an aristocratic British pigeon. Much of the humor stems from the humans' mistaken belief that Squeak, the heroine of the piece, is a male and from Squeak's belief that the human tenants of the building where she roosts are her parents.

The White Robin RC 17015
by Miss Read
Narrated by Miss Read, the local schoolmistress in the village of Fairacre, this story begins with the appearance of an albino robin that enchants both children and adult villagers. National reports by a local ornithologist add to the wave of excitement until a malevolent act harms the precious mascot and challenges Miss Read's good nature.

Braille

The White Robin BR 4770
by Miss Read
Narrated by Miss Read, the local schoolmistress in the village of Fairacre, this story begins with the appearance of an albino robin that enchants both children and adult villagers. National reports by a local ornithologist add to the wave of excitement until a malevolent act harms the precious mascot and challenges Miss Read's good nature.

Children's Nonfiction

Discs

Birds at Night RD 7064
by Roma Gans
Describes eyes, feet, and feathers in their role as protective features for sleeping birds. For grades K-3.

Birds Do the Strangest Things RD 11730
by Leonora Hornblow
The strange and wondrous antics of a number of birds, both rare and common. For grades 2-4.

Mockingbird Trio RD 7301
by Arline Thomas
The true story of Chuck, George, and Andy, orphaned baby mockingbirds who became TV stars. For grades 4-7.

Cassettes

One Hundred Twenty Questions and Answers about Birds RC 9585
by Madeline Angell
This book answers a wide range of common questions about bird flight, feathers,

eating and drinking habits, nesting, and care of the young. For grades 4-7.

How Birds Learn to Sing RC 15437
by Barbara Ford
Explores the song and calls of different birds and the learning involved in their sound-making. For grades 4-7.

Pet Birds RC 10569
by Joan Joseph
A simple, practical guide discusses various breeds of birds available as pets and the care, food, and housing they require. For grades 5-8.

Birds Are Flying RC 19585
by John Kaufmann
This simple introduction to birds explains why they are such good fliers and describes the various ways they fly. For grades 2-4.

Little Dinosaurs and Early Birds RC 12220
by John Kaufmann
Explains what fossils tell us about the earliest birds, and describes how small dinosaurs became birds and how they began to fly. For grades 2-4.

What's in the Names of Birds RC 11161
by Peter R. Limburg
This potpourri offers an array of facts and folklore by tracing the name origins of forty-eight familiar North American birds. For grades 5-8 and older interested readers.

Braille

Baltimore Orioles BR 2976
by Barbara Brenner
This simply written text describes a pair of Baltimore orioles as they court and mate, build a nest to raise a family, leave the nest to fly south for winter, then return the following spring to raise another family. For grades 1-3.

It's Nesting Time BR 4678
by Roma Gans
This simple introduction explains how and where birds make their nests. For preschool-grade 2.

Birds in Flight BR 1827
by John Kaufmann
This study describes the anatomy of birds, the structure and function of wings and feathers, and principles of flight. For grades 5-8.

Children's Fiction

Discs

Arabel's Raven RD 7597
by Joan Aiken
Three short stories about a raven named Mortimer who eats everything, sleeps in the refrigerator, and croaks "nevermore" from time to time. For grades 3-6.

The House of Wings RD 6090
by Betsy Cromer Byars
Left with his grandfather until his parents are settled in Detroit, a young boy learns to respect and love the old man as they care for an injured crane together. For grades 4-6.

A Boy Called Plum RD 7674
by Darrell A. Rolerson
During a lonely summer on a Maine island, Plum captures a baby blue heron as a pet. He ties it to a water tower, although he knows that the bird must be free. For grades 5-8.

Dougal Looks for Birds RD 6527
by Martha Bennett Stiles
On his very first bird-watching expedition, Dougal MacDougal spots such an unusual bird that nobody believes he has really seen it. For grades K-3.

Cassettes

Are You My Mother? RC 22795
by Philip D. Eastman
A baby bird falls from his nest and begins searching for his mother. For beginning readers in preschool-grade 2.

Seabird RC 10317
by Holling Clancy Holling
An ivory gull carved by young Ezra Brown on a whaling trip in 1832 brings luck to him and his descendants as they journey the seven seas. For grades 4-7.

Braille

The Paper Crane BR 6126
by Molly Bang
A mysterious man enters a restaurant and pays for his dinner with a paper crane that magically comes alive and dances. For grades K-2.

Are You My Mother? BR 6107
by Philip D. Eastman
A baby bird falls from his nest and begins searching for his mother. For beginning readers in preschool-grade 2.

Princess September BR 1143
by W. Somerset Maugham
Princess September is persuaded by her jealous sisters to cage her lovely nightingale so she can hear him sing whenever she wants to. But he stops singing and almost dies of sadness after she imprisons him. For grades 4-6.

Cassettes

A Complete Guide to Bird Feeding
RC 17632
by John V. Dennis
An ornithologist and biologist explains how to attract a greater variety of species and tells precisely how to choose (or make) and install the feeders preferred by various birds. He advises on how to stock the feeders with grains, berries, seeds, meats, fats, fruits, and nuts that appeal to different birds.

America's Favorite Backyard Birds
RC 20534
by Kit Harrison
This popular guide to bird-watching focuses on the ten most common bird species, such as robins, cardinals, blue jays, and woodpeckers. Offers a wealth of information on each: what they look like, where they live, what they eat, how they behave, when they nest and mate, and how the young are raised. Included are the author's own experiences and observations.

The Backyard Bird-Watcher RC 14355
by George H. Harrison
For fledgling birders, this guide to the techniques of attracting birds to suburban and rural yards gives basic data on planning, feeding, birdhouses, and water. Offers advice on coping with common problems and makes specific suggestions for various geographical areas.

Birdwatching: A Guide for Beginners
RC 23709
by Joan Easton Lentz
This primer discusses all aspects of bird-watching, including equipment and clothing, as well as birding techniques, methods, and ethics. Intended primarily for neophyte birders who want to learn correct procedures.

Hand-taming Wild Birds at the Feeder
RC 11368
by Alfred G. Martin
This instructional guide has fascinating true stories, includes eleven rules for making friends with birds, and describes how to identify birds with confidence.

How to Attract, House, and Feed Birds
RC 18852
by Walter E. Schutz
Information on bird-watching as a hobby and instructions on making feeders and bird houses.

A Guide to the Behavior of Common Birds RC 16552
by Donald W. Stokes
Naturalist Stokes introduces us to the complex patterns of social behavior and communication for twenty-five common birds and translates them into a language we can understand. Includes behavior calendars, display guides, and descriptions of behavior.

Bird Songs

Any sounds produced by birds may be called songs, including a wide range of alarm, flocking, and other calls. Most biologists, however, use the term "birdsong" to refer to the complex sound patterns produced principally by the most recently evolved order of birds--the perching, or passerine, birds. Many birdsongs have rhythms that are pleasing tones familiar to the human ear, but the sounds of birds are usually modulated so rapidly that no comparisons can be made with musical notes and scales. In fact individual song structures are less significant than the Darwinian, or adaptive, aspects of birdsong.

The songs of perching birds are concerned with the breeding season and mating behavior. For most of the 5,000 species of songbirds this means a male holds territory and acquires a single female, although many exceptions exist to the monogamy rule. Birdsong is heard primarily from the males, each perched somewhere in his territory, and is related to hormonal secretions. The song identifies the species among other species in the same area and, sometimes, the individual singer relative to its neighbors of the same species. These facts have been shown by playback of recorded song.

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Sound Production

Songbirds produce sounds in the syrinx at the junction of the windpipe and the bronchi branching to the lungs. Because two bronchi exist, at least two independent sources of sound are possible. It appears that the left side produces more sound than the right. This is reflected also in larger song-control areas in the left side of the brain. Passerines have at least four and sometimes as many as eight pairs of muscles controlling the movements of the cartilage-supported syrinx, in which thin vibrating tympaniform membranes are assumed to generate sound.

Although some species sing only a single sound over and over, in extreme cases individual sounds may number in the hundreds or more. This is true of the American mimic thrushes, including the mockingbird. These repertoires of sounds may be clustered into discrete songs, as exhibited by garden sparrows and warblers, or may be sung in a continuous string, as exhibited by mockingbirds. The sequences are often highly predictable but not necessarily fixed.

Learning

Young birds develop song repertoires in much the same way that humans learn to speak. The young copy the sounds of their parents or other members of their species. After a certain age, however, copying becomes difficult or even impossible. This age may be three months for

the white-crowned sparrow; others may retain their copying capability into their first, or possibly second, breeding season.

Although part of the restriction on learning is social, the evidence suggests that the nervous system of the birds is tuned to accept only sounds with certain characteristic features. Swamp sparrows will copy recorded sounds taken from songs of their own species, but will not copy sounds taken from songs of their close relative, the song sparrow. Other birds--including the mockingbird, lyrebird, starling, and myna--mimic the sounds of other species.

Repertoires among species that copy only the songs of their species may be remarkably similar among different birds. Often such similarities are locally distributed and are called a dialect. Not all species develop songs primarily through copying adults; some do so through the related process of improvisation.

Duetting

Particularly common among tropical songbirds, especially mates, is the habit of duetting. One member begins, and the other replies with remarkably precise timing. Examples are the African shrike, New World wren, and Asian jay. The sounds used by each partner are often highly predictable, although the birds may use different sounds in different duets. Duetting among tropical birds seems to be associated with long tenure of territory through the season and with long, perhaps lifelong, pair bonds.

R.E. Lemon

Sources

Recorded versions of bird songs are available for sale. A comprehensive catalog may be obtained from:

The Crow's Nest Bookshop
Laboratory of Ornithology
Cornell University
Sapsucker Woods
Ithaca, NY 14850

Print Periodicals

The two magazines cited below reflect the range of available print materials. None are available in recorded or braille formats at this time. Other print magazines may be identified by contacting the Reference Section, National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped.

American Birds
950 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022
$25 (5 issues--one year)
A technical guide for the more experienced enthusiast. Regional reports, articles on field identification, taxonomy, and technical details are included.

Bird Watchers Digest
P.O. Box 110
Marietta, OH 45750
$15 (6 issues--one year)
A popular periodical for beginning and intermediate birders. Brief articles, letters, questions and answers, and advertisements for appropriate equipment and supplies are noted.

National Audubon Society

The National Audubon Society is a conservation organization of more than 550,000 members working at international, national, regional, state, and local levels toward the preservation and wise use of America's natural heritage.

For more than three-quarters of a century, the Society has provided leadership in scientific research, wildlife protection, conservation education, and environmental action. The first Audubon group was organized one hundred years ago, in 1886. The Society's nationwide sanctuary system protects more than 250,000 acres of unique natural habitat for birds, wildlife, and plants. The organization runs education centers, workshops, and camps supported by more than 500 chapters and ten regional offices located throughout the United States. Publications, most notably Audubon magazine, are known for their beauty and accuracy. By participating in a number of international organizations, including the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the International Council on Bird Preservation, the Society helps foster a better understanding and resolution of global environmental issues.

The National Audubon Society is a nonprofit organization supported by membership dues, and individual, corporate, and foundation contributions and bequests.

Benefits of membership in the National Audubon Society include subscriptions to Audubon magazine and NAS, and membership in a local chapter. Most important, members have the satisfaction of knowing that their dues are working to preserve the earth's natural heritage through Audubon's far-reaching environmental conservation programs.

For further information, write or call

National Audubon Society
950 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022
(212) 832-3200

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